

Wrap yourself up in the history of America as it is seen through the eyes of a quilter. Throughout the years quilts have become unique accounts of history. Take a walk through the past at Homestead National Monument of America and discover how quilt making reflects who we are as a country.

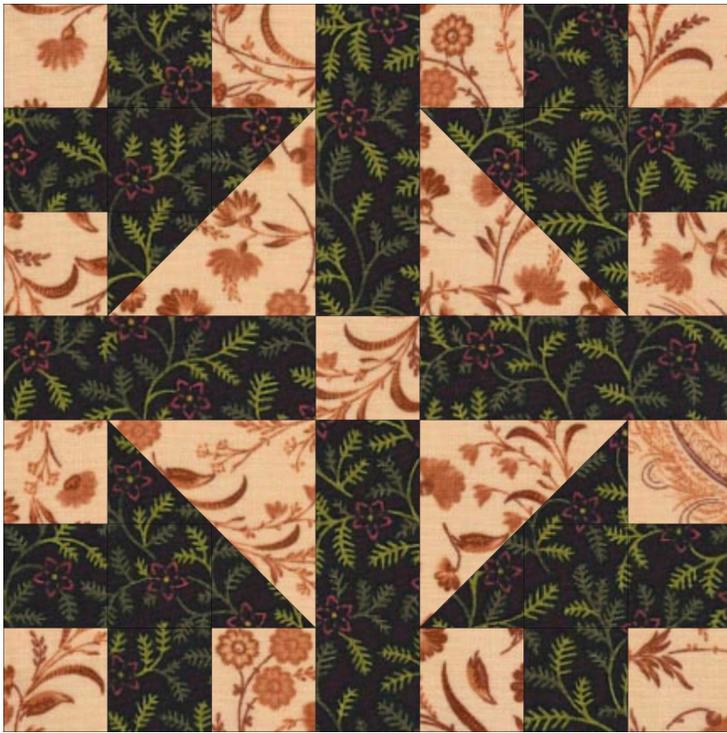
This year our Nation will observe the 150th Anniversary of the Homestead Act of 1862. In commemoration of this significant occasion, the Monument introduces the “Quilt Discovery Experience,” a unique way for visitors to learn how American Women used quilts, and quilt block designs to convey their family history.

Thousands of quilt blocks and patterns have been created and sewn throughout the years. The patterns on display in the “Quilt Discovery Experience” were used in the quilts made by homesteading women. Over a hundred and twenty years worth of popular patterns which were used between 1862, when the Homestead Act was signed by President Abraham Lincoln and when the Act was repealed in 1986, are displayed for all to see! Follow the trail to learn more about quilt making, and see how a quilt, represents so much more.

Quilt Discovery Experience

Homestead National Monument of America
Beatrice, Nebraska





Lincoln's Platform

"Entrance to Heritage Center"

Deeply engaged in a bloody Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln did not hesitate when Congress presented him with legislation that could energize a weary nation. When he signed the Homestead Act of 1862, President Lincoln sent a clear message that he believed the Union could, and would endure, and that it would prosper.

As a result, 270 million acres of land, owned by the Federal Government, in 30 states, was offered for homesteading, thus creating the Westward Movement, one of the largest migrations of people in our nation's history.

The quilt patterns or "blocks" that are displayed in the Quilt Discovery Experience were in the quilts used by pioneer women as they traveled West and homesteaded the prairie. They also depict other popular patterns used in 1862, and in successive years, until the Homestead Act was repealed in 1896.

Follow the Quilt Discovery Experience to learn more about quilt making, the history of quilts, and how quilts truly are documents of our American history.

Thank You

Special thanks to
Kay McKinzie
for her vision and leadership in creating the
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We also recognize Larry McKinzie,
Don & Bev Ewer, Rhonda Eddy, and Ann Reimer.



Picture Source: International Quilt Center, Lincoln, Nebraska

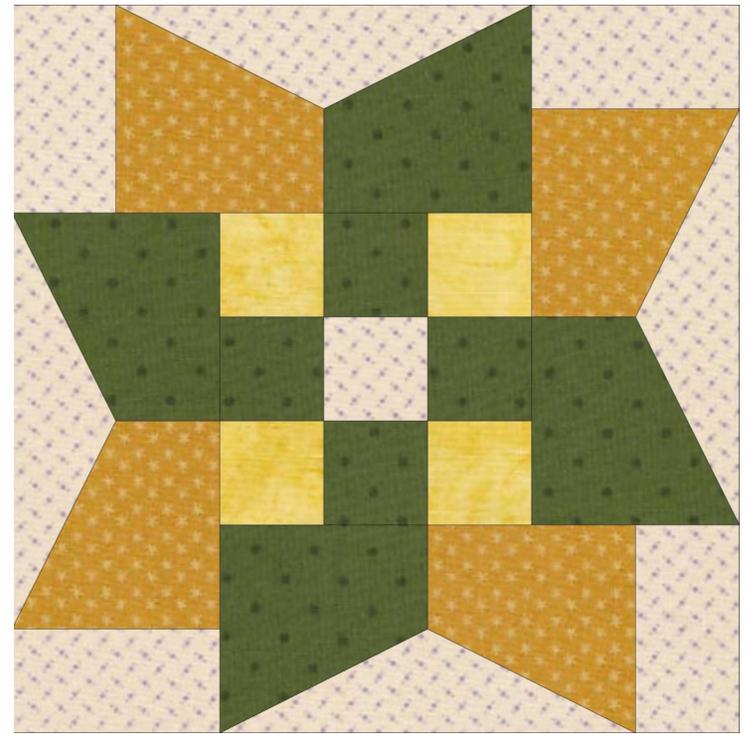
Nebraska State Block **“Barbed Wire Fence”**

The history of the state quilt block goes back many years. In 1907, the Fancywork Department of a popular farm magazine, Hearth and Home asked readers throughout the country to contribute pieced block patterns representing their state. Selected blocks appeared in monthly issues of the magazine until the series ended in 1912. The patterns printed sold for five cents each.

Through the years, a number of variations to the original pattern have been made. Quilters today are able to alter the overall effect of the block by changing color combinations and the use of light and dark fabrics within the pattern.

“Our lives are like quilts,
Bits and pieces, joy and sorrows
Stitched with love.”

‘The best kind of sleep beneath Heaven above,
Is under a quilt, handmade with love.’



Nebraska Pinwheel **“Dempster Windmill”**

Wheels represent movement. The pioneers depended on wheels to carry them across the plains.

For the homesteaders, wheels were vital to their lives. They were the basis of their transportation. Wheels were used in sawmills and in gristmills where grain was ground into flour or meal.

In the early 1900’s, windmills pumped water for livestock and made life on the homestead easier. Because of its importance to the homesteaders in their everyday lives, the wheel was often a favorite quilt pattern.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, quilt making took on new significance. The government took all the wool produced for commercial use, and actively urged citizens to make quilts using the slogan, “Make Quilts-Save the Blankets for our Boys Over There.” As a result, many utilitarian quilts for home use were made. These quilts soon earned the nickname of “Liberty Quilts.”



Log Cabin

“Fence by the Palmer-Epard Cabin”

The Log Cabin is one of the most well-known and popular of all patchwork patterns. To the pioneers, it symbolized home, warmth, love and security. The center square was done in red to represent the hearth, the focal point of life in a cabin or home.

The name, Log Cabin, comes from the narrow strips of fabric, or “logs” arranged around the center square. Each fabric strip or log was added to the pattern in much the same way logs were stacked to build a cabin; and because the straight lines and small pieces of the pattern could utilize almost any fabric scrap available, it often became the final step in the recycling of fabric.

Many Log Cabin patterns were worked in two color schemes, lights and darks, divided diagonally in the middle. This represented the sun’s east to west movement in the sky. As the sun rose, its light shown on the cabin, creating the light side of the block. As the sun traveled west, part of the cabin was left in the shadow, creating the dark side of the block. This is often called the Sunshine and Shadow pattern.



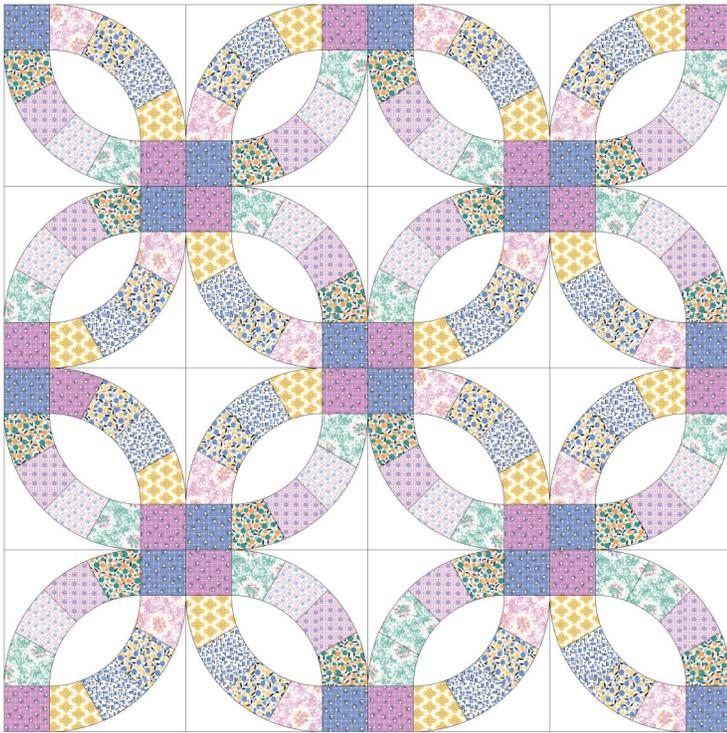
Dresden Plate

“Barbed Wire Fence”

The 1920’s and 30’s were known as the Victorian Era. During this time, Dresden, Germany produced porcelain plates decorated with elaborate designs using flowers, fruits and foliage. These became the inspiration for the Dresden Plate quilt block.

To create the block, the petal shaped wedges of the design are pieced together and the completed plate is then applied to a square block of fabric.

Many refer to quilts made during this era as “feedsack quilts,” because quilts were made by recycling the sacks that had been used for holding grain and seed. Women saved and traded the feedsacks to get the colors and patterns they wanted. Often, they would send a scrap of a specific feedsack with their menfolk, when they went to town, to make certain they returned with the desired pattern and color.



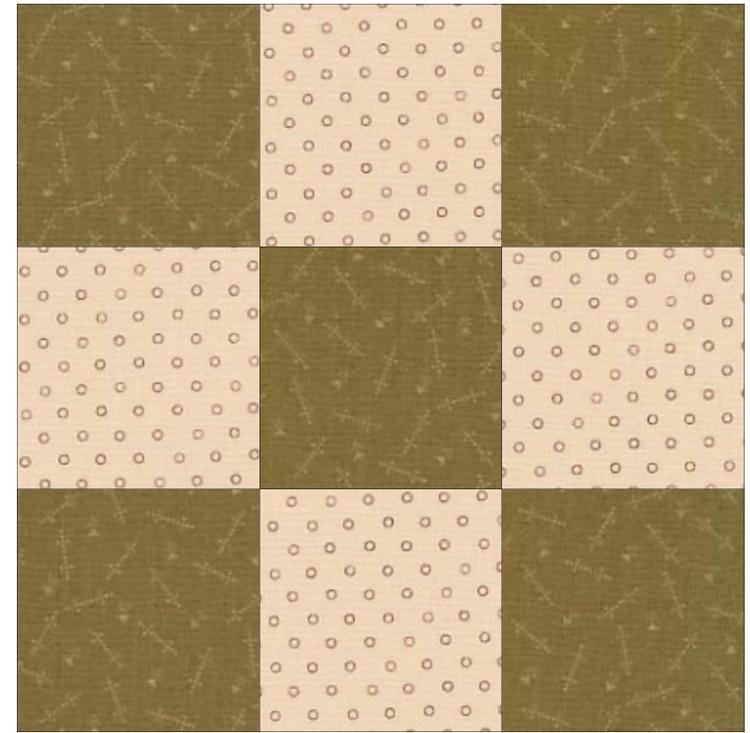
Double Wedding Ring
“Barbed Wire Fence”

During the early 1900’s women’s tastes shifted from dark colors to a rainbow of pastel colors –watermelon pinks, mint greens, and lemon yellows. The Double Wedding Ring was a pattern that lent itself well to the pastel fabrics.

Many of these quilts were made using quilt kits which could be ordered through catalogues. Some of the kits supplied patterns and instructions. The more expensive kits included pre-cut fabrics. These saved the quilters hours of work, as the pattern used hundreds of small pieces which needed to be cut exactly for the pieced quilt to lie smoothly when completed.

A feature of many Double Wedding Ring quilts was its scalloped edge created by the circles that made up the quilt.

Before printed patterns, quilters would sew a block together, as a way to give each other the pattern. Later, sample blocks, in cotton or silk, could be ordered from catalogues.



Nine Patch
“Fence by the Palmer-Epard Cabin”

The Nine Patch is another popular pattern used by pioneer women. The earliest homesteaders had neither time or fabric to spare. Most of the quilts they made were utility quilts, quickly sewn together for warmth.

The Nine Patch is one of the simplest and quickest quilts to sew, and because it was a good way to use up every small scrap of fabric available, it was used often.

On the prairie, sewing was an essential skill. Young girls learned to sew blocks before they learned to read. At an early age, often as young as three or four, girls were taught to piece simple blocks such as the Nine Patch. Many were very skilled at piecing a block by age five.

Edith White, who grew up in the mid-1800’s remembered, “Before I was 5 years old, I had pieced one side of a quilt, setting at my mother’s knee half an hour a day.” This training was called “fireside training.”



Churn Dash

“Outside of the Palmer-Epard Cabin”

The homesteader’s life and daily activities contributed names to many quilt blocks. Nineteenth century quilts reflect what women saw around them, and what was important in their lives, such as the churn, a common household item.

A quilt historian says that quilts had characteristics so localized they could be classified geographically almost as easily as the Yankee twang or the southern drawl. As the homesteaders traveled West, blending together on the trail and in the new territories, the patterns became intermingled and renamed.

The Churn Dash pattern, for example, has 21 different variations and names. But, whatever the name, it was meaningful to the maker, for even the simplest quilt represented a considerable investment of time and energy. And when the winter winds blew snow through the chinked cracks of the log cabin, a quilt was a welcome cover, no matter what it was called.



Sunbonnet Sue

“Barbed Wire Fence”

Sunbonnet Sue was one of the most popular patterns to emerge in the early 1930’s. Sue first appeared with her partner, Overall Bill, as outline embroidery in the late 1880’s. Patterns for applique appeared around 1910. Feedsack prints were often used to create Sue’s dress and bonnet. A personalized quilt could feature fabric from a child’s dresses.

During this period, quilts with juvenile themes for the nursery and young children emerged. Embroidered picture quilts, done in turkey red on a white background were very popular. Quilt themes were taken from nursery rhymes, story book characters, alphabet blocks, or folk tales. The quilts were crib size and were often used to teach children to sew or embroider.

Realizing that a child had a unique and distinct personality with special interests of their own, crib quilts were no longer miniaturized versions of adult patterns.



Basket
“Barbed Wire Fence”

Naturalistic motifs, such as flowers, leaves and vines, have been favorite textile designs for centuries, and American quilts share this tradition. Many of these quilts are appliqued because this method is best suited to the curved shapes of the flowers and vines.

This same theme is possible to create in a pieced quilt. Baskets, with flower designs, were a popular motif among quilt makers from approximately 1850 on, as they could be easily adapted to suit individual tastes, fabrics and color combinations.

The variety of patterns seems almost endless, from baskets with handles to those without, to those with appliqued fruit and flowers added to the pieced basket, to pattern variations including Broken Sugar Bowl, Cake Stand, Flower Pot and May Basket.

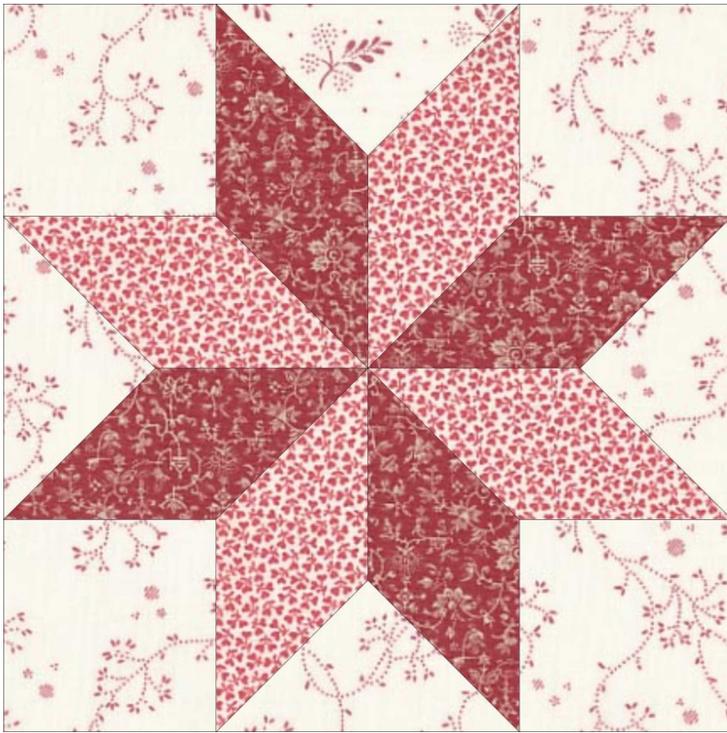


School House
“Freeman School”

Settlers went West for a better life, and part of that better life was education. It was natural then, that the schoolhouse was often one of the first public buildings in many communities.

Many times, the Schoolhouse block was a variation of a house or church pattern. Most featured a side view of the building and were either pieced or appliqued. Depending on the skill of the quilter, and time available to her, crosses in the windowpanes and outlines of the doors could be added.

During World War II, quilts were a way to raise money to support the Red Cross. The Signature Quilt was especially popular. Business people, store owners, and community citizens paid a small fee to have their names embroidered on quilt blocks. The finished quilt was raffled off with all proceeds going to the Red Cross. These quilts now serve as fascinating examples of history in the community.



Eight Pointed Star

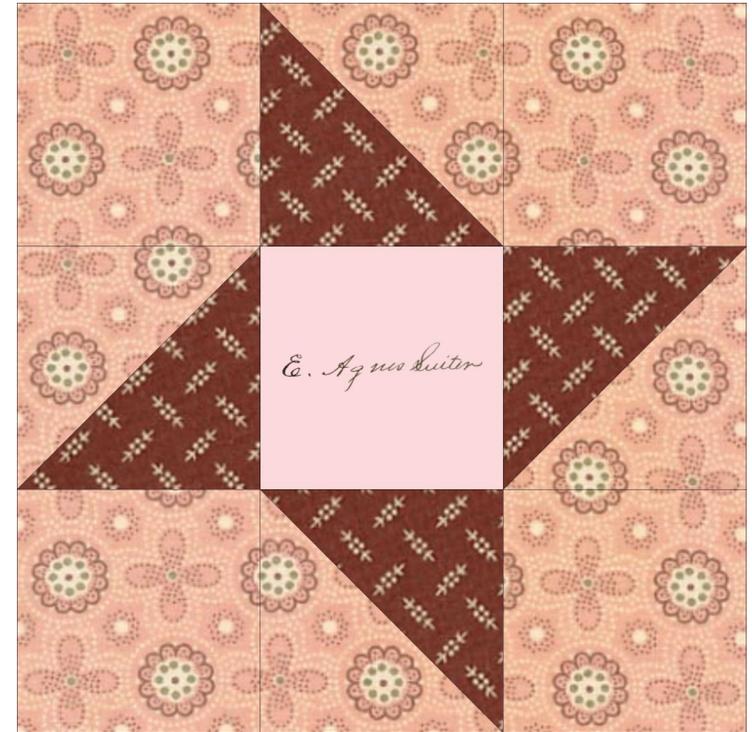
“Freeman School Parking Lot”

Stars are probably the most common motif used on quilts. Homesteaders traveling West used the stars for guidance. They viewed stars as religious symbols of their faith in God.

There are hundreds of star patterns. Some quilts have just one large radiating star, often called the Star of Bethlehem or Blazing Star, while in other quilts, dozens of smaller stars are used. The simplest and most popular star pattern is an eight-pointed star.

A star pattern is not an easy design to cut or sew. Precision is extremely important as any inaccuracy in cutting or piecing is multiplied as pieces are added. If poorly pieced, the quilt will not lie flat when finished. An intricate star pattern was one way for a woman to show her needlework skills.

Many times the quilt maker deliberately sewed a mistake somewhere in the quilt. It is thought, by some, that this reflected the maker’s faith in God; for only God can make a perfect thing.



Friendship Star

“Barbed Wire Fence”

The quilts the homesteaders brought with them were a comfort to the women who traded their home, family and friends in the East, for the uncertainty of traveling to a new home. A quilt that held special value to the pioneer women was the Friendship Quilt.

Often it was done in secret, and then given to the woman as a going away gift. It usually was a group effort, with each block being sewn by a friend or relative with their name embroidered in the center.

Putting a Friendship quilt on the bed, gave a woman a sense of connection with her former way of life. It kept alive the memory of family and friends, providing comfort and company during the difficult days of homesteading.

One woman homesteader said, “When I get lonely, I read the names on my quilt.” It was like getting a hug from home.



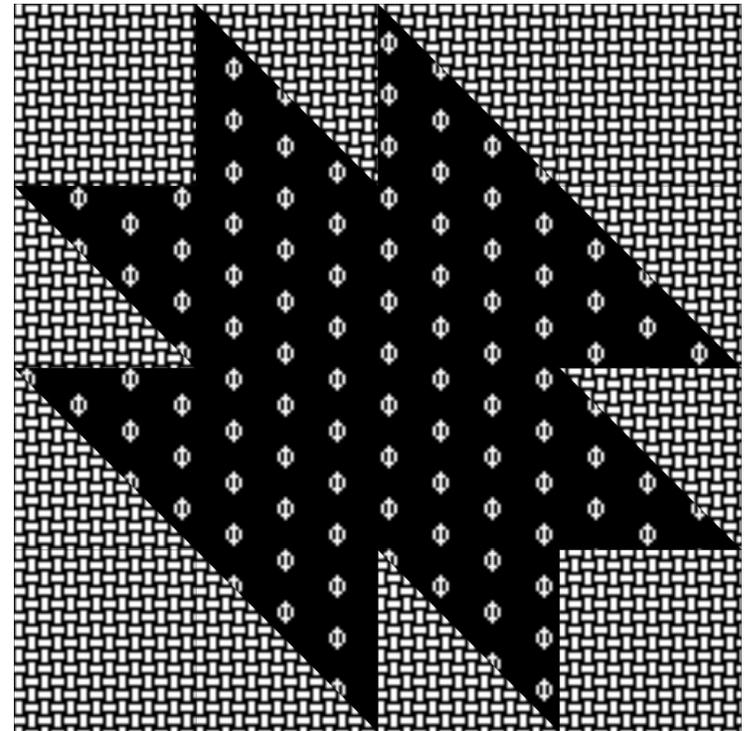
Grandmother's Flower Garden
“Native Plant Display”

Grandmother's Flower Garden was popular in the late 19th Century, and hit its peak of popularity about 1925.

It was popular during the Depression when quilt making was almost a necessity, as women were forced to return to frugal homemaking once again. The hexagon provided a way to use small fabric scraps, and was a cheerful reminder of colorful flower gardens, a much needed lift during hard times. The number of hexagons in the finished quilt and their size were a matter of pride for the quilter.

This pattern has a long history, dating back to the Colonial Period where it was known as Mosaic, Honeycomb, or French Bouquet.

Godey's Ladies book, founded in 1830, published the pattern in 1835. It is thought to be the first pieced quilt pattern published in America.



Anvil
“Farm Implement Room”

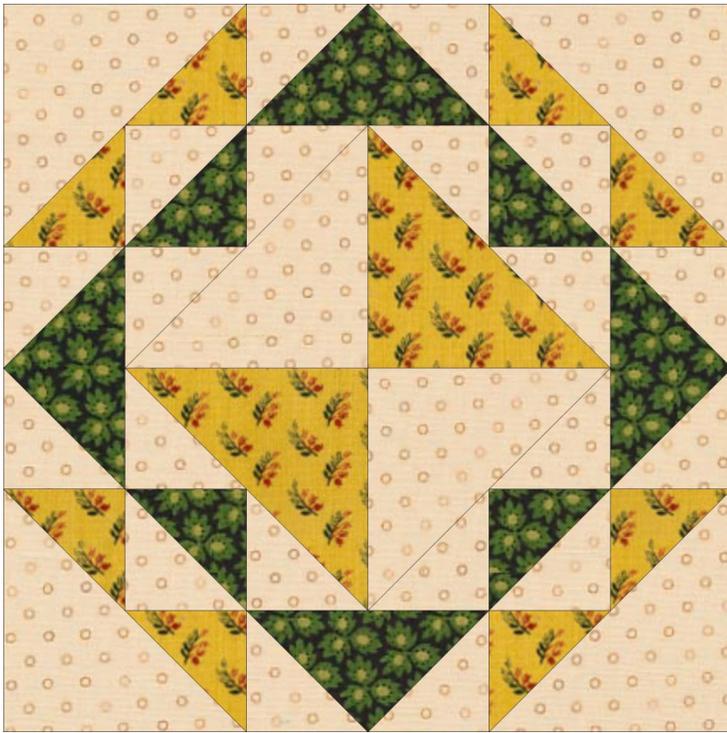
Not only did quilt patterns reflect the daily work of the women who helped to homestead the prairie, they told the story of the challenging work of the men.

The Anvil pattern represented one of the necessary and important activities of the early settlers-blacksmithing.

Other basic patterns include Saw-Tooth, Bowknot, Carpenter's Wheel, Compass, and Monkey Wrench.

By 1890, catalogue sales included quilt patterns. If a woman ordered her yard goods from Sears or Wards, she could purchase any of 800 designs for just a dime.

By the early 1900's, magazines went a step beyond publishing patterns. Some had a column where readers could share favorite patterns and new ones they had designed. Quilters were no longer restricted to only quilt patterns known in their region. From bustling city to lonely farmhouse, women could be making the same quilt.



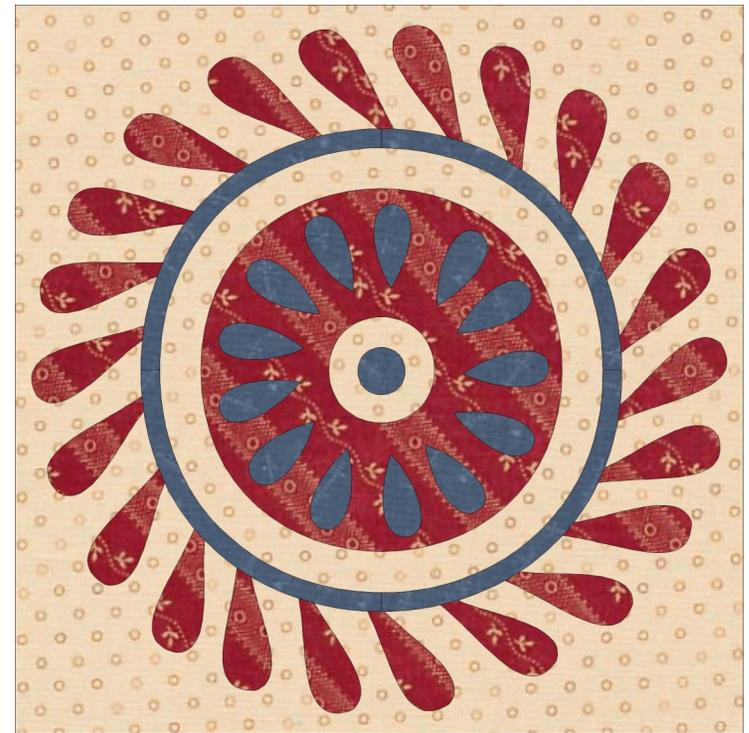
Corn and Beans
“Farm Implement Room”

Quilt patterns reflected our country’s agricultural society and the family’s dependence on the crops they harvested, the fruit and vegetables they grew, and the foods they preserved. Up until 1920, most people lived on farms. Only 2% of the population resided in towns or cities. A quilt pattern that reflects this agricultural influence is Corn and Beans, both of which were essential to the homesteaders.

Quilting allowed women to escape from the hard work, rigors, and drabness of their everyday routine. With seven or eight women gathered around the quilt frame, a quilting bee, offered an excellent way to socialize.

It was such a popular event that Stephen Foster, one of America’s beloved songwriters, wrote a song about it:

“In the sky the bright stars glittered
On the banks, the pale moon shone,
And ‘twas from Aunt Dinah’s quilting party
I was seeing Nellie home.”

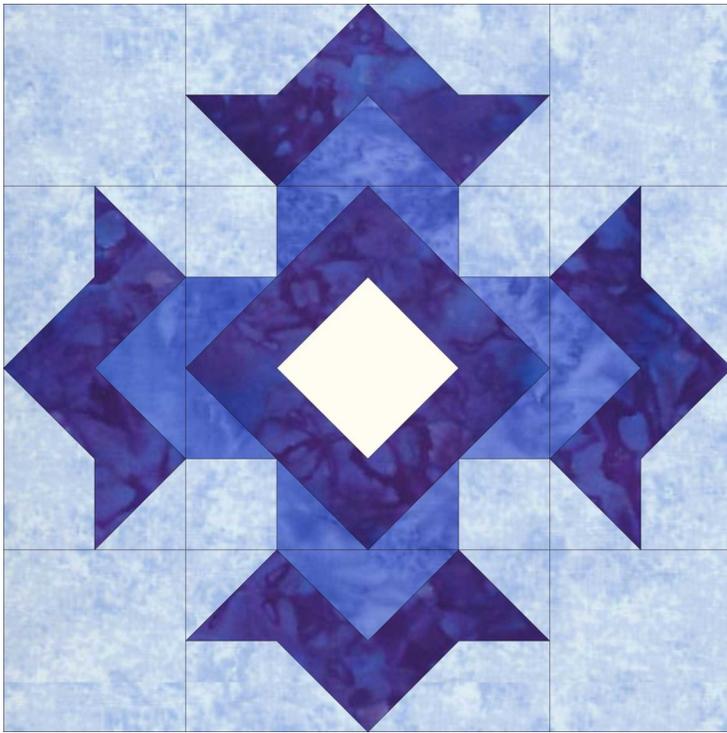


Liberty Wheel
“Daughters of the American Revolution Monument”

Through the years, women have been closely connected with political issues. Women listened to the men, and from their discussions, formed their own opinions. Their needles became their pens; their quilts their texts.

Patriotic quilts have been created ever since the Revolutionary War. They portrayed love for one’s country and celebrated American heroes such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Quilts featuring the American Eagle enjoyed wide popularity from the late 1780’s until the 1840’s, were revived during the Civil War, and for our country’s Bicentennial.

Women used quilt designs to make a political statement. Patterns, which had Biblical or household names, were given relevant names by women who had social concerns on their minds. The pattern known as Jacob’s Ladder became the Underground Railroad. Renaming the Job’s Tears pattern to Slave Chain, demonstrated northern women’s political sentiments.



God's Eye
“Upland Trail by Bench”

America was founded on the principle of religious freedom, so quilts that reminded the homesteaders of their devotion to God were especially meaningful. The trip to new land was filled with danger and daily challenges, which tested even the strongest men and women. It was a rare person who did not lose a family member, often a child, along the trail.

The practice of using quilts as burial shrouds was fairly common among westward travelers. Wood was often scarce for coffins, so families used what was available and appropriate. Wrapping a loved one in a quilt was a way of not only preparing the body for burial, but of giving reassurance to the living that the deceased person was still linked to his or her family. A quilt that carried a Biblical name was a source of comfort, and with their enduring faith, kept the family going.

Other popular patterns were Jacob's Ladder, Cross and Crown, Bethlehem Star, Crown of Thorns, and David and Goliath.



Rose of Sharon
“Site of Freeman Cabin”

One of the oldest applique quilt patterns is the Rose of Sharon. The Rose of Sharon, mentioned in the Bible, might actually refer to a wild tulip that grows today on the plains of Sharon in Palestine. When the Bible was translated into English, the word rose was used in place of the word tulip.

In the 1800s, it was a custom for a young girl to make a baker's dozen of quilt tops before she became engaged. This collection consisted of 12 utility quilts, and one great quilt, which was pieced or appliqued, as a show piece for a bed. The Rose of Sharon was often used for the great quilt. Many young women traveled West as brides, their great quilt folded safely in a trunk.

The Whig Rose is another name for this pattern. It is thought the name came from the 1828 Presidential election. The newly formed Whig party hoped to beat out Democrat Andrew Jackson. The Whig party dissolved in the mid 1800's, but the pattern name lived on.



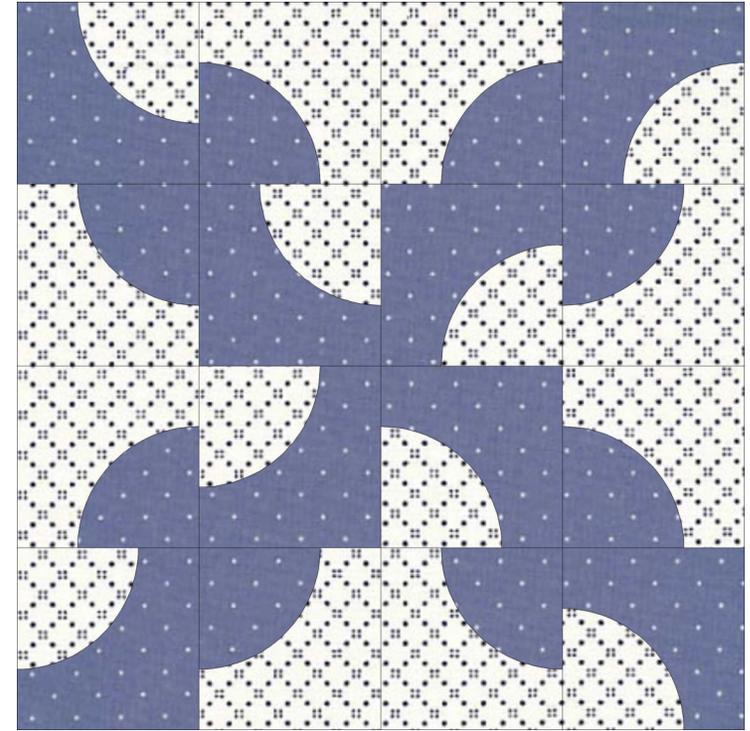
Pinwheel

“Demonstration Fence – Sod House”

Nineteenth century quilts were primarily practical; beauty was secondary. Quilts served as window and door coverings. Hanging quilts on the dirt walls of a “soddie”, made them seem more homelike. Quilts could serve as privacy walls, creating sleeping areas in a soddie, or one room cabin. Quilts folded and laid on a board placed between two chairs or tree stumps, became a sofa.

When a quilt became so badly worn around the edges that even rebinding could not rejuvenate it, a seamstress would cut it down to eliminate the worn areas, or rework it into a child’s quilt. Any quilt was too precious to discard.

The importance of quilts in women’s lives was best expressed in a statement of one 19th century homesteader, Lydia Roberts Dunham, who said, “I would have lost my mind if I had not had my quilts.”



Drunkard’s Path

“Weather Station Trail – On Fence”

It is easy to imagine the origin of this name. The meandering diagonals resemble a drunkard’s staggering walk.

Sewing for a cause is an old tradition. Women made quilts to raise money and consciousness, both to promote the abolition of slavery and to promote women’s rights. Women across the country were also involved in the Temperance Movement. By 1907, The Women’s Christian Temperance Union had 350,000 members.

Prohibited from voting, the Drunkard’s Path was a popular way for a woman to express her opinion on alcohol and its use. It appears that more quilts were made for this cause than for any other.

Although other colors were used, blue and white became the Temperance Union colors: white for purity and blue for water, the purest beverage available.



Wild Goose Chase

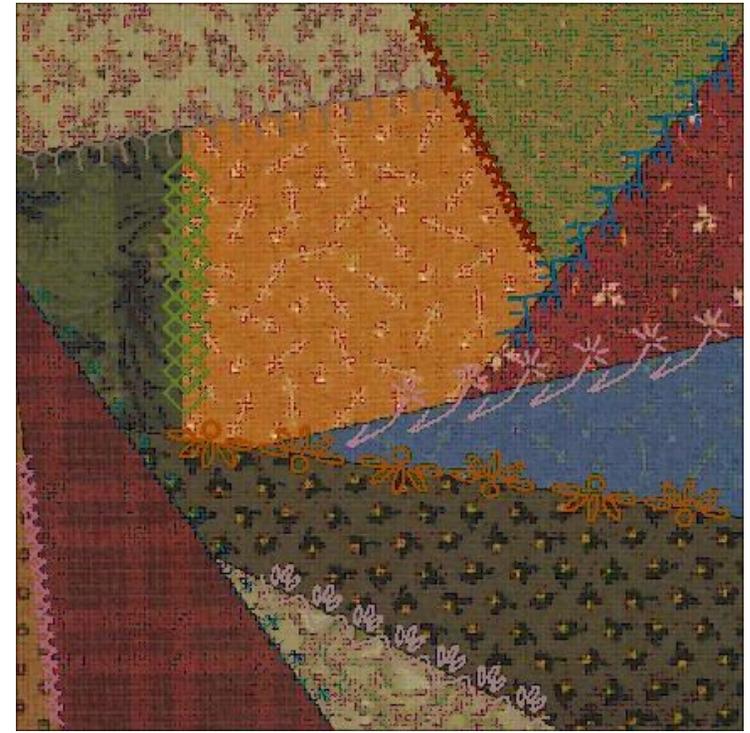
“Woodland Trail - Water Wayside”

Nature was an obvious and rich source for quilt patterns. Many patterns are named for trees, flowers, animals and birds.

The homesteaders watched the migration of flocks of geese and created quilts with that in mind. Although the triangle is used in hundreds of other quilt designs, in this block, triangles represent the geese. Pioneer women expressed their artistic abilities and creativity in the way they arranged the triangles or geese, and in the colors they used. That may be one reason why the Wild Goose Chase pattern has at least 14 variations.

Other patterns that reflect nature include Bear Paw, Dove in the Window, Hen and Chickens, Dogwood and Sunflower.

Quilting was not just a woman’s activity. Over the years, men have also been quilters. In fact, as boys, at least two presidents, Calvin Coolidge and Dwight D. Eisenhower, helped their mothers piece quilts.



Crazy Quilt

“Upland Trail by Big Tree and Bench”

The Crazy Quilt is probably the oldest of quilt patterns. Early quilters used any scrap or remnant available, regardless of its color, design, or fabric type. Worn out clothing, women’s calico dresses, men’s pants and shirts, household linens, and other oddly shaped fabric scraps were fitted and stitched together. The result was a hodgepodge of color, and a quilt with a story behind each scrap.

Making utilitarian quilts fell out of favor in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s as America became more industrialized and technology brought improvements to the home.

The Crazy quilts or throws of this era featured rich colors and textures and were used to decorate the parlor. Skill in fine embroidery was emphasized. Victorian quilters filled their quilts with bits and pieces of their personal past; a piece of father’s vest, a husband’s tie, lace from a wedding veil, or ribbons commemorating political events.